

Boundaries in prayer

ADDITIONAL STUDIES IN PRAYER

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STUDY FIVE: BOUNDARIES IN PRAYER

God has not given mankind a blank cheque in regard to prayer. He has not left himself subject to our every whim and fancy. Embedded in the Scripture are a number of boundaries which put a fence around both who can pray and expect to be heard and what we can pray for. Many of our questions about why prayer is ineffective are answered here, for much of what we or others assume to be prayer, is not true or valid Biblical prayer.

A. PRAYER MUST BE DIRECTED TO THE ONE TRUE GOD

The Scripture states:

'there is no one who seeks God' (Romans 3:11). It also says: 'anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists' (Hebrews 11:6).

In one way this boundary is quite obvious: of course prayer must be directed to the one, true God - for there is no other God there to answer prayer. (See **Studies in the Lord's Prayer: Study 2** , section A). What is not so obvious, and frequently overlooked, is that many people assume that they are praying to the one true God when in reality they are praying to their personal *idea* of god, rather than the God revealed in the Scripture, and seen definitively in Jesus Christ. Consider:

Matthew 11:27	No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.
John 4:10	If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.
John 5:37ff	You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. ... you refuse to come to me to have life.
John 5:45ff	Your accuser is Moses ... he wrote about me ... since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?
John 8:19	You do not know me or my Father ... if you knew me, you would know my Father also.
John 8:42	If God were your Father, you would love me.
John 8:47	He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God.
John 10:30	I and the Father are one.
John 12:44ff	When a man believes in me, he does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me. When he looks at me, he sees the one who sent me.
John 14:6	No one comes to the Father except through me.
John 14:7	If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.
Romans 9:5	... Christ, who is God over all, forever praised.
Colossians 1:19	God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him
Colossians 2:9	In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form
Hebrews 1:3	The Son is ... the exact representation of his being ...

1 John 5:20,21

He is the true God and eternal life. Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

Prayer to any other 'god' than the God revealed in and by Jesus Christ is simply not prayer to God. The references above teach that those who do not know that Jesus Christ is God, do not know God. As Paul points in Romans 10:14, 'how can they call on the one they have not believed in?' For this reason we are encouraged to get out there and tell them, so that they can believe and confess, that 'Jesus is Lord'.

A. 1 Does this mean that *no* prayers of people who do not know God by knowing Jesus are heard?

No, it doesn't. But it does mean that we cannot give unbelievers any assurance that God will listen to their prayers. It does mean that when the prayers of unbelievers *are* heard it is an act of sheer mercy on God's part, and totally on the basis of his sovereign will and purpose. It is God's will that no one should perish, that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9), that all should believe in him by believing in his Son, and, by the believing, have eternal life (John 3:16).

We must never here fall into the error of blaming God. Mankind has *chosen* to reject God's self-revelation:

1. The whole world has the knowledge of God in full view in creation, but has chosen to suppress, corrupt and/or discard that knowledge (Psalm 19; Romans 1:18-32).
2. The nation of Israel was given awesome historic evidence of the presence and power of God, but they rejected that knowledge and replaced worship of the true God with the worship of idols (Exodus 32, and right through to the exile).
3. The nation of Israel was given the written word of God - 'the Law and the Prophets', but these they had so twisted and supplemented until the truth was lost, that when Jesus came they did not recognize him (see Table above).
4. To the Jews living at the time of Christ, God, in Christ, gave his most precise and most complete self-revelation - again to be misunderstood and rejected, crucified as a blasphemer. This was their choice.

In choosing rejection of the one true God, mankind has chosen not to be heard by God.

A.2 Why then are some prayers of people who do not know God heard?

1. Because God is full of compassion. This is demonstrated by Jesus healing and helping people who had no genuine belief in him, and in Jesus' statement that God sends his rain and sun to the just and the unjust alike (Matthew 5:45).
2. Because God wants to make himself known to people. Also demonstrated in the miracles of Jesus.
3. Because God wants people to come to repentance and faith (see A.1 above).
4. Because God, who knows the end from the beginning, is working out his eternal purpose, into which he incorporates human beings, both individual and national, with or without their knowledge or consent.

B. TRUE PRAYER IS AN EXPRESSION OF TRUE FAITH IN THE ONE TRUE GOD

The Bible teaches a direct connection between faith and prayer. This connection issues out of the fact that true prayer is addressed to the one true God. Only those who have faith, only those who believe in the one true God, can rightly pray. The value of faith exists only in its object, and never in itself as an isolated thing. Here we must be careful not to understand this faith as either 'faith in prayer', or 'faith that I will get what I ask just because I ask', or 'faith in faith'. True faith is always faith in God. As such, there are many things that true faith will *not* ask for because they are contrary to God's purpose and character, and, therefore, outside the boundaries of true and right prayer. It is never our faith that is the fundamental cause of any granted petition; it is always God, in whom our faith is placed, and who gives to our faith any value that it has, who is the decision-maker, source and giver of the response to prayer. Thus in the references below we must understand that *faith* is not effective just because it is faith, but because it is *faith in the one who alone is God*. Note particularly the first text where is 'so little faith' could not drive out the demon, but 'faith as small as a mustard seed' achieves the impossible. What is the difference between these two minimal faiths? That the first has a defective content or focus, and the second, small though it is, has the right content, is focused on the one who alone is God.

Matthew 17:19,20

'Why could we not drive it out?' Because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'

Matthew 21:21,22

... if you have faith and do not doubt If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

Mark 11:22-24

Have faith in God. (Read passage).

John 15:7

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

Romans 14:23

... everything that does not come from faith is sin.

C. TRUE PRAYER TO THE TRUE GOD IS GOD-ORIENTED

Think carefully about the examples of or statements about true and false prayer in the three tables below; relate these statements to your experiences of unanswered prayers.

C.1 True prayer is not focused on the human act of praying.

Zechariah 7:5ff	When you fasted and mourned ... was it really for me that you fasted? And when you were eating and drinking ... were you not just feasting for yourselves?
Matthew 6:5	When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men.
Matthew 6:7	And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words.
Matthew 6:16ff	When you fast, do not look sombre as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting ...
Luke 20:47	They ... for a show make lengthy prayers.

C.2 True prayer does not brag in the presence of God.

Luke 18:11,14	The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evil doers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ... Whoever exalts himself will be humbled ...
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C.3 True prayer issues from a humble, self-denying heart and mind (see also Study 3: F: Fasting as Prayer).

Isaiah 58:1-14	... Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers ... you cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high ... (Read whole passage)
Hosea 6:6	I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.
Amos 4:1-13	You women who oppress the poor and crush the needy ... Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning ... (Read all)
Amos 5:22ff	Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them ... let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.
Matthew 16:24	If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.
Mark 10:35-40	... Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other at your left in your glory ...
Luke 9:57-62	(Read passage).
James 4:3	When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

D. TRUE PRAYER LEAVES THE DECISION / ANSWER / RESPONSE IN GOD'S WILL

Expressing true faith in the one true God, true prayer will never 'lord it over' God. Because true prayer has God's honour, kingdom and will as its primary concern (See **Studies in the Lord's Prayer**, Studies 3, 4, and 5) it will always submit and subject its requests to that primary concern, that dominant desire. It knows nothing of the 'blab it and grab it' 'name it and claim it' mentality that characterizes much of current thought about prayer. Here is no demanding concept of prayer, here is no assumption that prayer will be automatically granted, but rather that humility and self-denial which we have already seen.

In addition, true prayer also acknowledges the superiority of God's infinite knowledge and eternal purposes and perspective over its own finite understanding and earthbound plans and desires.

This attitude of submission to God's will leaves not only the decision, but also the timing and the manner of God's response, in his hands.

[**Note** : some popular preaching on prayer today completely denies this aspect of prayer, encouraging Christians to believe that they have the right to demand healing or wealth or whatever they want from God. Such an attitude in prayer is far from the mind and example of our Lord Jesus Christ.]

Matthew 6:10	... your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Matthew 26:39etc	My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.
Matthew 26:53	Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?
Mark 1:36-38	... they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else - to the nearby villages - so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.'
Mark 5:11,19	... the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, 'Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.'
John 6:38	I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.
John 12:27	Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say?' Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!'
Romans 8:26	In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.
Romans 15:31,32	Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea ... so that by God's will I may come to you ...
1 Cor 16:7	... I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits ..
2 Cor 12:8.9	Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'
James 4:15	... you ought to say 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.'
1 John 5:14,15	This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that is we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us - whatever we ask - we know that we have what we asked of him.

E. TRUE PRAYER IS ALWAYS PRAYER *IN JESUS' NAME*

E.1 True prayer approaches God trusting in his mercy in Christ, not in personal merit.

True prayer is both **penitent** - acknowledging no personal right of access and approach, acknowledging personal sinfulness and personal sin, and **confident** - trusting in the mediatorial efficacy of Jesus Christ our great High Priest, who by the offering of the one sacrifice of his own body, once-for-all, gained for us, and guarantees, our permanent and eternal unimpeded access into the presence of God. Thus true prayer approaches God both humbly and boldly at the same time, *in the name of Jesus Christ*.

True prayer knows that apart from Christ, apart from this 'in his name', our sins and iniquities would hold us in a state of separation from God in which we had no right of access into his presence, and in which our prayers would not be heard (Isaiah 59:2).

Luke 18:13	The tax-collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'
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John 14:13,14	I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.
John 15:16	The Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.
John 16:23,24	In that day you will no longer ask me anything. ... my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.
John 16:26,27	In that day you will ask in my name. I am not saying that I will ask the Father on your behalf. No, the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.
Romans 1:8	I thank my God through Jesus Christ ...
Ephesians 3:12	In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.
Ephesians 5:20	... always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
Colossians 3:17	And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
Hebrews 4:14,16	Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.
Hebrews 10:19-23	... since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

E.2 Prayer in the name of Jesus puts a limit on the kind of things we can pray for.

This fact that true prayer is prayer *in Jesus' name* puts an additional fence around our prayer, because there are obviously many things which we could not pray in the name of Jesus because they are not things that Jesus would approve or validate.

E.3 Only those who believe in Jesus Christ can truly pray *in his name*.

The fact that we are to pray in Jesus' name automatically excludes the prayers of those who do not believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be and that he did what he did in dying on the cross. Unbelievers do not pray in his name, irrespective of whether or not they tack the *words* on the end of their prayers. The promises about prayer in his name, given by Jesus to his eleven faithful disciples in John 14 to 16, were specifically given to them on the basis of:

- their faith in him (John 14:11,12);
- their being clean because of the word he had spoken to them (John 15:3);
- their union with him (John 15:5);
- their being loved by him (John 15:9);
- their friendship with him (John 15:15);
- his choice and appointment of them (John 15:16);
- their rejoicing in him (John 16:23);
- the Father's love for them (John 16:27) and
- their belief that Jesus came from God (John 16:27).

F. TRUE PRAYER COMES FROM A MIND/HEART IN TOUCH WITH THE MIND/HEART OF GOD

While it obvious from what has already been understood about prayer that we are utterly dependent on the mercy of God in Christ for our access to him, and that our own supposed meritorious actions do not gain us admittance into his presence or his response to our prayers, the Bible also teaches an essential connection between our lifestyle and actions and the expectation of our prayers being heard. This is because of the nature of true faith. True faith always contains a real acknowledgement of the authority of Jesus Christ to be the 'boss' of our lives: he told us to *follow him*. True faith believes not only his promises, but also

his commands, because it believes in *him*. As James points out clearly in his second chapter: faith without works is dead. Thus faith includes the two aspects of trusting his word *and* obeying his word - not that either the trust or the obedience are perfect, but they are there.

F.1 True prayer and pride/self-confidence are incompatible.

We have already looked at this specifically under the headings C.2 and C.3 above. Pride and self-confidence are also excluded under headings D and E.

F.2 True prayer and a lifestyle of unrepentant sinfulness are incompatible.

Psalm 66:17-20	I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue. If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God surely listened and heard my prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!
John 9:31	We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will.
James 5:16b	The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.
1 Peter 3:7	Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.

[**Note:** Psalm 66:17-20 is often used to whip Christian believers into introspective self- or group- confessionals, teaching that if there is any unconfessed sin (that is, individual sins that have not been specifically and verbally identified) then God will not hear their prayers. Such a notion cuts right across the gospel message that in Christ we *have* (present tense) forgiveness (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14), that in the kingdom of Jesus Christ *grace reigns* (Romans 5:20), and that because of Jesus Christ, our great high priest, we have boldness to approach the throne of grace where we will find grace and mercy to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16) as identified in E.1 above. If we really look at this verse it speaks of *cherishing* sin in our hearts, something far different from having an individual 'unconfessed' sin in our hearts. Individual unconfessed sins and a life of unrepentant sinfulness are two extremely different things.]

F.3 True prayer and refusal to forgive are incompatible.

Matthew 5:44,45	Pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.
Matthew 6:12,14	Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.
Matthew 6:23,24	... if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.
Matthew 18:15-35	Read passage.
Mark 11:25	And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.
Luke 6:37	Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.

For further on this point go to Studies in the Lord's Prayer, Study Eight: As we forgive.

F.4 True prayer and lack of generosity are incompatible.

Job 29 - 31	Read
Isaiah 58:1-14	Read
Matthew 25:31ff	Read

Luke 11:38 Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.

Because true prayer is the expression of true faith in the true God, he who truly prays will also demonstrate in his life an increasing likeness to the God in whom he believes and whom he seeks to honour.

F.5 True prayer and vindictiveness/grudge bearing are incompatible.

Luke 9:54,55 ... they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' but Jesus turned and rebuked them ...

Luke 10:40 ... Martha ... asked 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'

Similarly, the mercy and compassion of God, will overflow into the life of those who truly know him, and who alone can truly pray to him.

G. TRUE PRAYER IS CONFIDENT OF GOD'S FAVOUR AND GOODNESS

Study the passages below in their context, and make a list of the qualities that identify prayer as confident of God's favour and goodness and an opposing list of those characteristics that identify wrong prayer.

Matthew 6:7,8 Do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Matthew 6:32,33 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 7:7-11 ... if you, , then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!

Matthew 15:21-28 Read.

Luke 11:5-13 Read.

Luke 18:1-8 Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up ...

Hebrews 11:6 ... anyone who comes to him must believe ... that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

James 1:5-7 ... when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea ... he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.